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China, the US and ADMM-Plus: Towards confidence building in Southeast Asia?

LSE Ideas

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The year 2010 has been portrayed as a negative one for the Sino-American relationship. Differences over issues such as the yuan's exchange rate, how to deal with the North Korean nuclear issue or respect for human rights are said to have weakened bilateral relations and shown the discrepancy between Beijing's and Washington's values and policies. Yet, 2010 was not a lost year. Unnoticed to many, US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates and China Minister for National Defence Liang Guanglie attended the first-ever [ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus \(ADMM-Plus\)](#). Bringing together the ministers of defence of all ASEAN member states and eight of the association's dialogue partners, this forum is poised to become a key driver of confidence building in Southeast Asia, including, crucially, the South China Sea. The fact that the US and China agreed to dispatch Gates and Liang to the meeting despite bilateral relations allegedly being at a low point demonstrates the importance that both countries confer to it. This can only have a positive effect on regional security.



US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates and China Minister for National Defence Liang Guanglie at the first-ever ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) Source: AFP

Southeast Asia is considered to be a potential flashpoint for Sino-American tensions or even conflict. China has been the dominant power in the region throughout history. Today, its influence can be felt not only in business and political centres across the region, but also in military cooperation between the PLA and the Filipino, Thai and Vietnamese armies. Meanwhile, the US has military facilities located in Singapore and the Philippines and its army has a good working relationship with the Malay and Thai military forces. Coupled with US Navy regular patrols in the South China Sea, which Beijing considers to be under its jurisdiction, the stage could be set for military conflict between the US and China. A clash between the USNS Impeccable and five Chinese ships in March 2009 seems to confirm this assertion.

Yet, China and the US have not had a serious confrontation in Southeast Asia since the Vietnam War. And the [ADMM-Plus](#) has the potential to be the beginning of the end to tensions in the region between the two powers, realistically not in the near future but at least in the mid-term. The experience of the annual [ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting \(ADMM\)](#) first convened in 2006 provides a hopeful example in this respect. This forum has served ASEAN member states to strengthen cooperation in dealing with non-traditional security threats. They have issued joint concept papers on the use of military capabilities in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, military-civil society cooperation on non-traditional security issues, and linkages with non-ASEAN partners. Even though the principles advanced in these concept papers are yet to be fully operationalized, a working group of defence senior officials that meets several times a year ensures that the annual [ADMM](#) is not a mere talk shop.

In fact, the [ADMM-Plus](#) developed from the [ADMM](#). Recognizing that traditional security threats could not be dealt with in the absence of China and the US, the [ADMM](#) soon started to work on creating a broader and more inclusive forum. More importantly, during its first meeting in [Ha Noi in October 2010](#) it became clear that [ADMM-Plus](#) would not be a new [ASEAN Regional Forum](#), instead serving to openly discuss specific issues of concern to participating countries. Besides delving on common threats such as terrorism, piracy or proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, participating countries discussed the situation in the South China Sea as well. Given that this is the biggest source of discord between China and several ASEAN countries with overlapping territorial claims, the mere fact that it was discussed with the US was an important step forward. Moreover, five working groups made up for [ADMM-Plus](#) senior officials met in Surabaya a few weeks ago. One of the groups, dealing with maritime security, discussed the situation in the South China Sea. The group has the potential to become the first regular forum to tackle differences over sovereignty in this sea.

The [ADMM-Plus](#) framework serves a dual purpose for Washington and Beijing. It allows both of them to be central players in the most important security mechanism of a region in which both of them have a deep interest. Neither China nor the US wants to be left without a seat in the discussion table on issues such as piracy in the Malacca Strait, the exploration of energy resources in the South China Sea, the role of Indonesia in regional affairs, or the future of Myanmar. A confluence of national interest and prestige underpin the interest that both countries have in being involved in Southeast Asian affairs. Therefore, it is unlikely that any of them will retreat from the region any time soon. The [ADMM-Plus](#) is a cost-effective way to remain involved.

In addition, the [ADMM-Plus](#) is the latest in a network of institutions bringing American and Chinese officials together in dealing with issues of mutual concern. The degree of mutual confidence between Washington and Beijing has been growing as relations have become more institutionalized. The full-blown war predicted by many analysts in the 1990s is unthinkable today.

The trade wars forecasted in the 2000s have yet to materialize as well. In contrast, China and the US are working together on issues such as the North Korean nuclear conundrum, climate change negotiations or managing to the global financial crisis. The [Strategic and Economic Dialogue](#) involving dozens of high-ranking officials from both countries is the main conduit of discussion and cooperation on economic and security affairs at the bilateral level. The G20 serves a similar function at the global level, albeit only on the economic realm. The [ADMM-Plus](#) could well fill the existing void at the regional level, where no similar institution exists. Given the lack of effectiveness of the [ASEAN Regional Forum](#), there is a pressing need to deal with regional security disagreements on an institutionalized and regular basis. The [ADMM-Plus](#) could help to reduce tensions between China, the US and ASEAN countries, bringing an era of greater understanding and cooperation in Southeast Asia.

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